



The U.S. Military Academy Band

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A Military March, A Percussion Section's Interpretation

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A percussion section's role in performing a military march is one that is most often regarded without much thought. This is due to the rhythmic simplicity of the percussion parts. However, if a march is to be played with extreme musicality and authenticity one must look deeper into the intent of the percussion orchestration of the snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, and occasionally bells/glockenspiel.

Snare Drum: First lets explore the role of the snare drum. Due to the symphonic settings where military marches are performed a concert snare drum 6 1/2"-14" is often used. A field drum could over-power the ensemble in many concert settings. Usually if not marching, a field drum is unnecessary except perhaps in the Grandioso or break-up strain. In a Grandioso strain the doubling of the snare part on a field drum could be a nice color. Perhaps having the snare drummer switching to a field drum during the final or break up strain would also add variety to the march. When playing in a symphonic setting closed rolls, as opposed to open (double strokes) rolls, are more appropriate. The snare drum has the most intricate part within the percussion section and will control the dynamics and phrasing. Be careful that the snare drum fits into the melodic line of the march, and does not drown it out. A good idea is to have the snare drum and the melody play together. Make sure the melody is as rhythmic as the drum is melodic.

Bass Drum: Most important in the performance of a march is the presence of the bass drum. Try to capture a constant, articulate sound. Experiment with the bass drum finding the "sweet spot" or the area which has the best tone, usually found a few inches above center of the drum head. Watching the conductor is paramount for achieving and keeping the suggested tempo, however the sheet music is also very important and should always be observed. Attention to the printed part will indicate the musical nuances such as: phrases, accents, half notes, quarter notes, whole notes, dynamics, and especially rests. Try to make a difference in articulation between a written half note and quarter note. Perhaps striking in a different spot on the head will achieve this, or an alteration in the muffling of the head may be required. Matching the note length of the low brass section will likewise demand a change in muffling. Keeping a steady beat is also an important job of the bass drummer, however the player should never over-power the ensemble in exhibiting the steady tempo. Listening and matching the blend of the band is critical in executing the part in a musical manner.

Cymbals: The most often neglected percussion instrument are the cymbals. Sometimes there is very little written for the cymbal player except for a few solo crashes. This is because in many of the older bands the bass drummer also played cymbals with an attachment on the drum. So usually the bass drum and cymbals will play in unison unless otherwise noted in the music. It is common that cymbals be left out of the Trio stain. It is also common to complement the melody of a march with some climax cymbal accents,

however this should not be over done. Adding of accents will be a nice variation for a repeated strain. Be sure that if the bass drum and cymbals are performed separately they do work as one.

Bells: The bells often play in the Trio strain of a march, doubling the melody. An interesting idea is to leave the rest of the percussion battery out of the Trio allowing solo bells to represent the section. The player could also double the melody the second time through the final strain, adding to the final climax. Many groups will have the oboe or flute part doubled on the bells the whole way through the march. This practice could get a bit overwhelming and should be avoided.

Final Thought: Beware that many publishers have added parts and instruments not originally noted by the composers. A timpani part that may appear in a Sousa score was most likely added by the John Church Publishing Company. It is important to research background and the band that originally performed the march. Don't be afraid to experiment with leaving the percussion tacet on certain strains. This will allow for variety on the repeats which will keep the march interesting. A military march should be viewed as a percussion section's "bread and butter." Take time and analyze the musical possibilities of the section.

This article provided courtesy of the [U.S. Military Academy Band](#) at West Point, New York